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# GoDaddy Billionaires Steer Tech Fortune to Groups That 'Really Need Us'

By Maria Di Mento



GIRL SCOUTS ARIZONA CACTUS-PINE COUNCIL

OPENING DOORS: Bob Parsons (second from left) and his wife, Renee (second from right), support causes for women and girls, such as this Girl Scouts leadership center in Arizona.

Renee Parsons got her first taste of big philanthropy in 2010 when she was leading the communications and giving arms of GoDaddy, a web-hosting provider and domain-name registrar.

Her husband, Bob Parsons, who founded the tech company, had just heard about the devastating earthquake in Haiti and decided to act quickly by donating \$500,000 to the relief organization Hope for Haiti. He asked his wife to call the charity and let them know the money was coming.

When Ms. Parsons told the charity's then-executive director, Elizabeth Davison, about the donation, the seasoned businesswoman reacted in a way she had not expected.

"Elizabeth started crying and then I started crying, so it was kind of a mess, but it was certainly a memorable moment," Ms. Parsons recalls.

The money would help rebuild a hospital and orphanage in Port-au-Prince and would be the first of several donations the Parsonses would make to Hope for Haiti, eventually giving a total of \$7.5 million.

Ms. Parsons says the experience with that charity and others have been life-changing for her and her husband, who started their Bob and Renee Parsons Foundation in 2012.

## Tattoos and Motorcycles

The couple have given a total of \$127 million to charity so far, with much more to come, they say. *Forbes* recently pegged Mr. Parsons's net worth at \$2.7 billion, and the couple signed the Giving

Pledge in 2013.

They support six causes: youths, veterans, the homeless, medical care, education, and programs that help people in need achieve success. Aside from the Haiti gifts, the Parsons direct most of their money to charities that help underserved populations near Phoenix and Scottsdale, Ariz.

Among the efforts they support elsewhere: educational and other programs that help employees of the Hualalai Resort in Hawaii, where the couple has a second home, and the Semper Fi Fund, a charity that helps wounded and critically ill veterans and their families.

The Parsons met in 2007 on a blind date. Ms. Parsons was working as a senior sales manager for Starwood Hotels and Resorts at the time and had never heard of Bob Parsons. A quick Google search revealed a colorful and outspoken character known for his fondness for motorcycles and tattoos and for his company's racy Super Bowl ads. If nothing else, she thought, the date would be interesting.

What she found was an open, funny former Marine; a gregarious serial entrepreneur; a man she would later learn came from a humble background and had struggled in school, fought in the Vietnam War (earning a Purple Heart, a Combat Action Ribbon, and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry), and studied accounting at the University of Baltimore. He worked a series of jobs while teaching himself computer programming and eventually started Parsons Software and, later, GoDaddy, the two companies that made him rich.

The pair hit it off. His lively personality and up-by-the-bootstraps background appealed to Ms. Parsons, who describes her Mount Pleasant, Mich., upbringing as upper middle class but one in which hard work was prized and self-sufficiency and a certain amount of financial independence was expected of her and her two sisters.

She says she was eager to work from a young age and got her start at 13 at the Pixie, a modest diner her grandfather had started in 1948. She picked up trash and kept the restaurant's parking lot tidy during the busy summer season. Eventually she worked behind the counter.

Her family later owned a couple of restaurant franchises, budget hotels, and other businesses where she worked throughout her teens. After college, she segued into the hotel business in Chicago before moving to Arizona some years later.

The Parsons married in 2009 and soon after, Mr. Parsons asked his wife to join GoDaddy. The career move provided her a window into the local nonprofit landscape of the Phoenix metro region, an area with a large immigrant population, substantial wealth, and a great deal of poverty.

"It was shocking to see how many people were living in poverty in our community and didn't have access to the resources they needed," Ms. Parsons says.

## Focusing Their Giving

Having already given to a number of local human-service charities through GoDaddy's charitable arm, the Parsonsese were well versed in the needs of the region by the time they started their foundation. They were quickly inundated with grant requests from nearly every corner of Arizona.

It was hard to say no to worthy organizations when there was so much obvious need in the area, but Ms. Parsons says she and her husband soon realized giving smaller gifts every time they were asked wasn't going to help anyone on the level they hoped.

"I said to Bob, 'I think it's important we focus on causes that are really important to us and places where we can channel our dollars to really make an impact instead of spreading it around to all these causes and not making a difference,' " she says. "If it didn't hit one of our core causes, then we had to decline because we had to stay focused."

The Parsonsese set out to find nonprofits they could help significantly over time. To do that, they have looked for groups with low overhead costs where most of the money donated reaches beneficiaries.

Although not an Arizona organization, the Semper Fi Fund is a good example. Nearly 94 percent of the national charity's expenses are spent on its programs and services, according to the watchdog group Charity Navigator.

The Parsonsese have devoted about \$31 million so far to the fund and have participated in its fundraising efforts over the years by appearing at events and giving matching gifts.

## A Lasting Effect

Low overhead isn't the only factor the Parsonsese consider. When it comes to supporting local charities, they look for nonprofits that could use a big push.

"If they are doing great work but they don't really need us — they have massive fundraising, huge reserves — that's not where we're going to go," says Ms. Parsons. "We're really looking for the organizations that we can be game-changers for, where we can really help move the needle."

While the Parsonsese are focused on giving to charities where the bulk of their donations can have a lasting effect on beneficiaries, they are not opposed to helping a nonprofit with operating or related costs, and some of their donations include components of each.

UMOM New Day Centers, a Phoenix organization that provides emergency shelter and

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transitional-to-permanent housing and other services for homeless people, is among the local nonprofits they have helped on several fronts.

The Parsons have given the group a total of \$11.6 million, including \$5 million in 2013 so the charity could pay off its mortgage and build up its services.

Additionally, they give extensively to Girl Scouts Arizona, Cactus-Pine Council, including \$5 million in 2015 for a new building and to expand its leadership training and other efforts for women and girls.

A smaller donation backed the nonprofit's efforts to help girls who have an incarcerated parent, and the couple will soon announce a \$1.6 million challenge grant to raise matching funds from other donors so the group can complete its fundraising campaign and pay off any remaining debt associated with construction costs of the new facility.

The Parsons have given nearly \$10.4 million to the Southwest Center for HIV/AIDS and more than \$1 million for college scholarships to undocumented students and to the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Phoenix.

They also support smaller projects like mobile dental care for the uninsured, programs that help abused children, and other efforts to assist youths in crisis. The philanthropic couple are also planning to ramp up their efforts to help women and girls.

"We deal in hope. We want the dollars we provide to these organizations to inspire hope in those populations to achieve and exceed the American Dream in whatever way that means to the people we're trying to help," says Ms. Parsons. "That's what keeps us going."

*Correction: This article has been revised to reflect the Parsons' total giving to Hope for Haiti and to the Southwest Center for HIV/AIDS.*

*Send an e-mail to Maria Di Mento.*

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